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FREE AGAIN

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Shary Newman

PII Redacted

FREE AGAIN

On the long painful nights
When dreams are far away
My thoughts like a black veil
Engulf my soul

Black is the sky
Not one star is shining
And my weary eyes
Search beyond the darkness

I have to know
Before I can rest again
How to ease this grief
How to live again

Questions without answers
Race through my mind
Whose wish it was
To have us torn apart

Mothers from their children
Husbands from their loved ones
And tear out the canes
From under the old ones

The sick and the young
Went but a few steps
Then it all ended
But what about the living
What about us?

From one camp to another
We marched on and on
And the chain was heavy
On our body and soul

My mind is in a whirl
The answers elude me
And I tremble in fear
In the dark of the night

Will I find them ever
My mother, father, brother?
Will I ever embrace my lover
Now that it's all over?

The night has passed once again
And I welcome the distant light
Maybe the dawn of a new day
Will help erase the pain
Being free again

1944, March 19th, the day our world, as we knew it, had come to an end. The German army had occupied Hungary that day and because I was a Jew, my fate had been sealed. I was visiting my relatives in a little village about 300 kilometers from Budapest, my home. I knew I would not set foot in my home ever again.

The first days of the occupation did not seem real. But once the government of the village was in the hands of the Germans, the new edicts started to make sense to everyone. Everyone, that is, except the Jews, for the new laws applied only to the Jews. If you owned a store, the key had to be handed over to the authorities. If you operated a service, you were no longer allowed to do so. Jewish schools were abolished, as were religious services. Yellow stars had to be sewn to all outer clothing, front and back. Male members of each family from age sixteen to sixty were to report each day at the Market Square at 7:00 a.m. sharp for work detail. Curfew was at 7:00 p.m. If any Jew was found on the street after curfew, they were punished severely. My heart sank with each new edict. "How will I ever go back to my home?"

The people in this little village knew everyone. Who would help me with false papers; for a Jew was not allowed to travel by any means, anymore. "There is no way out, no way out!" The words just repeated themselves over and over in my mind.

My aunt and uncle had four children, two boys and two girls. My being there added one more worry to their already burdened lives. Passover was approaching and no one was making any preparations for the holiday. Rumors were circulating that soon we would be sent to a ghetto. Two days before the first seder, the traditional celebration of deliverance from bondage, the order came that all Jews would be sent to a ghetto. The "Ghetto" was a chosen place for the Jews to await their fate under the supervision of the infamous Hungarian Jandars. We were allowed to pack twenty kilos of personal belongings. No one was allowed to leave the house anymore. A lifetime of possessions, reduced to twenty kilos of belongings! I looked at my aunt as she was putting clothing into a suitcase. There was not a trace of emotion on her face. I asked her, "Aren't you sorry to leave everything behind?" "They are only objects", she said. "They can be replaced if we survive and come back." I began to cry, for her words sounded so final. I was not even eighteen years old. I was recently freed from a leg brace that I had worn for five years and was looking forward so much to my life. Instead, here we were, thinking the unthinkable. The end of our lives, the end of our family, the end of all our dreams.

After everyone went to sleep that night I sat down and wrote a long letter to my parents and my brothers and sister. I tried to explain my feelings for them; tried to tell them that I knew how much they loved me through all the years of my illness; that I knew how much they had sacrificed so that I could get the best care. I wrote about four pages, with tears streaming, never wanting to stop. My yearning to be with my family was so overpowering. I wanted so much to have my mother's arms around me; to feel safe; to not know this ache that was enveloping every pore of my being. I was so overcome by emotion that I blacked out for a few seconds. I knew I would never see my parents again. I sealed my letter and walked out of the house to mail it in the nearest mailbox. It was 3:00 a.m. and never once did I think of the curfew. No one was on the street and I got back safely into the house.

The next morning we were all herded into the Temple, 3000 people for muster. The Temple became a warehouse of people. We slept crisscrossed on top of each other. The older people huddled together and prayed night and day. The mothers rocked their babies in their arms; their tears flowed silently. The children were so quiet that their silence hurt one's ears. They must have sensed this was not ordinary travel; not a visit to a loving relative. This must be something very bad, because everybody is so sad looking. No one smiled anymore. We were looking at each other, not wanting to put our thoughts into words. We were only looking, putting a hand on a shoulder, as silent reassurance. "Yes, I am with you. I am scared too."

Finally, after two days of waiting, we were told to pack up again and started walking to our next destination. It was The Ghetto, forty kilometers away. The people of the village stood on the sidewalk, next to their homes. They stood staring at this marching spectacle of human misery. Some shouted, "Good riddance!" Not one said, "I'm sorry." Not one said, "I'll take care of your home until you come back." Not one said, "Let me have your baby, I'll save him." Not even one said, "God be with you." Only a few weeks ago we were friends, neighbors. Now 3000 people had become dispensable! How will they face tomorrow after the looting is done, after the sun rises again, for surely the sun would rise again and they would find the village void of all Jews. Will it make them happy? Will they even think about it, wonder about it? What if someone would do to us what we just did to the Jews? Would one priest, one nun, one God fearing person feel remorse? No. For their Messiah had arrived. Hitler had fulfilled their wish. The Jews were gone and all their belongings were there for the taking. The people went about systematically, looting every Jewish home. They moved in and took over. By the end of the day we were out of sight and out of the minds of all the people of the village.

By the end of the second day we had marched 40 kilometers and arrived in our temporary home, the Ghetto. The Ghetto was an open field where tents were pitched. Huge tents, with straw mattresses, and blankets piled in the middle. Our guards were the Jandars and they were the worst Jew-haters. Yet, if given a lot of Jewish money, they would grant small favors, such as sending a letter.

The food had to be prepared by each family over an open fire. Only bread and milk were rationed out. The only sanitary condition provided was an open latrine. Medical care was non-existent. The mood in the Ghetto was devastating. Rumors were circulating about mass killings. The word "Auschwitz" was heard over and over again. No one knew what Auschwitz was. We did not think of being separated. Labor camp? Yes, we can live with that. We will take care of each other. We can survive that. How naive, how gullible we were! How we trusted in God, He would not allow us to perish.

After three weeks in the Ghetto, conditions began to deteriorate. Our food supply was dwindling and water was becoming scarce. No one had taken a bath in three weeks. Laundering became a luxury. We began to live up to our reputation of "dirty Jew." Then suddenly, rumors spread that we were soon going to our "work camp." A glimmer of hope that maybe it would be better than the Ghetto.

Two days before we left the Ghetto, I developed an awful toothache. There were a number of dentists among us and I walked over to one that I knew and asked him to take a look. He asked me to sit down in a chair. After a superficial examination he said, "Your tooth is infected. It has to come out." I looked around. The place was teeming with people. I was sitting on a rickety chair, the doctor had no Novocain and I needed to have my tooth pulled. He did have his pliers. He gave me a shot of whiskey. I closed my eyes and he proceeded to extract my tooth. When it was over, I fainted. When I came to, I wondered how I had survived this ordeal. I felt so drained and weak. The dentist walked me back to my aunt's tent and told her what he had done. She took me in her arms and held me for a long time. I could feel her tears falling on my head as she was stroking my hair. She reassuringly said, "You will be all right, you'll see."

Two days later we were told to pack up again. We were going to our work camp. At a nearby train station the cattle cars were waiting to receive us. We had been marching toward it all day. As many as eighty people were jammed into each car. Once they were filled, each wagon was bolted from the outside. Suddenly fear gripped us like a vise. There was no room to sit, no room to stand, no food and no water. A sanitary bucket in the

corner was already overflowing. The humiliation to relieve oneself in public was more than many of us could bear. We still felt shame; we still felt human.

To speak about that torturous three-day-long train ride is futile. Words cannot describe neither the conditions nor what one was experiencing under those conditions. There is no precedence to which it could be compared. You had to be there to know of what I am speaking. To say that it was like a pigsty is not true; for hogs wallow in dirt, people do not. To say that it was like a grave is not true; for the dead are at peace, we were not. To say it was like a jail is not true; for prisoners are fed, we were not. Yet, it was all of those things and more. How did we survive this step of our deportation? How could we look at each other and see the desperation in each other's eyes mirrored a hundred times and not scream out in unison, "God, enough already! Take us now, or free us! What are we being saved for? More suffering? Is it our fate; the price for being a Jew? To be herded like cattle to the slaughter house. God, look the other way, we might fare better."

At the next stop someone asked the guard what we could do about the dead people. He said nothing, for soon we were to arrive in Auschwitz. When we arrived we looked through the air vents and could see hundreds of people marching. They were dressed in what looked like striped pajamas. The train jerked back and forth a few times and it came to a stop. The pajama-clad people came toward the train and lined up all along the platform with the German soldiers who were guarding our train. Additional German soldiers arrived with huge German Shepherd dogs; rifles ready; pistols drawn; against thousands of unarmed, hungry, sick, young and old, spiritually broken Jews. What could we have done to them? How could we have hurt them that they protected themselves so? They had bayonets on their rifles; they had pistols and they had dogs.

Suddenly, the stillness was broken as all the cattle car doors were opened at the same time. The striped-cloth prisoners started barking their orders. "Raus! Raus! Los! Los! Out! Out! Fast! Fast! Five in a row! No talking! Leave your bags! Move! Move! Faster! Faster!" There was no time to think; no time to say goodbye; no time for a hug, a kiss, an encouraging word. "Los! Los! Los!" "Where are we going?" "Don't worry, you'll all be together in a few days. You will work and all will be well."

The front of the line was getting closer. I didn't want to go, but I was there, right in front of Dr. Mengele. Left-right, left-right. With a whip in his gloved hand, he placed it between the shoulder of my aunt and me. My cousin was holding my hand. We were going to live and they were going to die. It was as simple as that. One hand touching my

shoulder with a whip and I am alive. Fate? No! I don't want Dr. Mengele to be my fate. I want to go with my aunt. I want to hold her little boy once more. I want to talk to my uncle and, most of all, I want to laugh once again with my cousins. I want to cry and I can't.

The striped-cloth prisoners would not let us linger another moment longer. Like cattle, we were herded into a huge room that was filled with soldiers and prisoners. We were told to get undressed but to keep our shoes and move into the next room. This room had nothing but chairs in it, lined up in rows, as in a movie theatre. Next to each chair stood a prisoner with scissors in her hand, pushing a girl into each chair. They started to cut everyone's hair down to the scalp. From there we were rushed into a room with shower heads and told to get washed. Quickly we were moved out of the shower and sprayed with D.D.T. Obediently we accepted the striped dresses that someone handed us. We were then led off to our barracks. I was looking for some familiar face in that sea of faces, but all the shaven heads looked alike. All the striped dresses covered the same body. All the world had fallen apart. I kept wondering what had happened to the rest of the transport. What was going to happen to us? Were we going to die? No answer, only the guards telling us, "This is your barrack, Block C. Remember it well. This is where you will all live."

The barracks contained wooden bunks in three rows, one in the center and two on each side. Each bunk had two more bunks on top of each other and ten girls were pushed into each bunk. There was only room to either sit or lay down on the bare wooden plank. One blanket was handed out for ten people, along with a metal bowl and a spoon for everyone. That very first evening the "Capo" called us to attention and started handing out post cards, telling us to address them to any relatives that we thought were still at home. We were told that we should all write the following: We arrived safely. Everyone is well and we will work in a labor camp. Do not worry. Love. When we said that all of our relatives had come on the same transport as we, the Capo said to write relatives we had in another city. I wrote to my parents and addressed it to a gentile friend, hoping they were still friends, and if they received the post card, would they be kind enough to convey my message to them.

The next day at dawn we were introduced to "Appell," the counting of heads. We lined up in rows of five, my four cousins and I; we always stayed together. First the Capo, then the guards and finally the S.S. officers counted us. Three times we were counted to make sure no one was missing. The counting took about two hours and it was repeated twice a day,

rain or shine. The Appell was also a time for more selection, or weeding as we called it. The young ones, the old ones and those who looked sickly were all weeded out as unfit for work. They were removed from the rows of prisoners without any explanation as to where they were being taken. That first morning we were told of our duties. The S.S. officers were walking along rows upon rows of shaven, striped cloth-clad prisoners, holding a dog in tow with one hand and snapping the whip with the other. Their very presence filled us with fear of death. We were told to obey our block leader, the Capo. Stealing food was punishable by death, sickness the same way. We would be assigned to a work detail and no one should even think about escaping. It was impossible. We were told that all of our relatives were well in other barracks and we would be visiting each other soon. Our food consisted of something that looked like coffee and a slice of black bread.

During the day we looked for relatives and friends by visiting other barracks. We were fenced into an area the size of a small village. There were barracks after barracks, each holding 1000 females. The male prisoners were on the other side of the fence. As we walked along the fence, the men were asking the same questions, "Had we seen any of their family members?" One man told me my uncle and his son, my cousin, who was 16 years old at the time, was in the same barracks as he. We sent a message to them saying my aunt and two cousins went the other way, but his older daughter was with me and we would try to stay together. We also asked him to send my uncle and cousin to this area of the fence the next morning after roll call and we would be waiting there for them. Unfortunately, this never happened. The next morning they were sent away on another transport to Dachau. Our disappointment knew no end, but the knowledge that at least they were alive, sustained us.

By the end of the day, we all knew what had happened to our relatives. We looked at the chimneys, smoking darkly and tears came very hard. How can one associate a smoke-belching chimney in the middle of June with one's parents, brothers, sisters and friends? Only a cold icy feeling. It envelopes you like ice on a bruise. It blocks out all other feelings, except that feeling of iciness. Like robots we eat, go to sleep, get up each day again and again and again. The shock is so complete, that in a matter of days, we have changed from ordinary human beings into tamed, unthinking, unfeeling animals, concerned with one thing only—how to survive. In the four weeks I spent in Auschwitz, all feeling of reality had forsaken me. I knew it was I who heard the words; it was I who saw the people in their misery all around me; it was I who felt the pains of hunger. But I also had the feeling that I was somewhere else, that I was only watching what was happening to me from a distance.

All the talk centered around food in the bunks. That overpowering feeling of HUNGER! It twists and churns and aches your body. It fills your dreams and it never lets you rest. HUNGER! It makes you aware of a hairline difference on a slice of bread. It makes you think potato peels are the best thing you ever ate, and the suspicion never leaves you that you have been cheated on your ration of food, for no one could live on such a small amount of food.

In the weeks that followed, we dwindled in numbers. Some died from lack of medicine, some just gave up and stopped eating and some went berserk after being used by the S.S. officers night after night. There were a few very beautiful girls whose hair was not shorn as the rest of us were. We wondered about it but never asked anyone why. No one would have given us an answer anyway. Then, in a few days, we found out why. The S.S. officers were saving them for their entertainment. Each evening they were called to the officers' quarters and sent back in the morning. One girl came back after the first night looking like a zombie. She was no more than 15 years old and very lovely. But after that first night, she stopped talking to everyone. All day she just sat, staring in the air, curling her hair absent-mindedly. Then one morning right after Appell, she darted out of line and threw herself at the barbed wire fence that was electrified. She died instantly. We were all very happy for her. She was through with suffering.

My bunk had ten girls in it, five sisters ages 15 to 26, my four cousins and myself. The 26-year old was a married woman. At home, we were all practicing Jews and the ceremonies were second nature to us. We all knew the prayers by heart. I still don't know how, but the married sister got hold of a candle and she said, "We will have Friday night services right here in our bunk. We will pray and God will listen to us and He will help us to survive. If we stop believing in God and in His goodness, we might as well die. As long as there is life in us, there is hope and hope is as important as the food we eat to keep us alive."

Word spread about our service and as many as could, gathered around our bunk, arching their necks to glance at the flickering candle, seeking a spark of hope to ease their unbearable despair. Our silent service over, we ate our meager ration and went to sleep with the tears flowing freely and silently. After that night, I was never again afraid of dying in the camp. I had the strongest belief that somehow I would survive and that belief stayed with me through the most dire conditions that were yet to come.

For four weeks we stood Appell twice a day. During the day we had chores to do—cleaning the yard, cleaning the latrine, picking up stones and pebbles and piling them into mounds. All day long German marching songs blared from the loudspeakers. The signs always facing us read "Arbeit macht frei" which means "Work makes you free." The orchestra was made up of the world's best musicians, in prison garb, welcoming the newcomers to this hell called Auschwitz.

If we had a chance we worked near the garbage piles, for it was a good day when we found some potato peels. We would wash them off and devour them. All the girls who worked in the kitchen knew of our practices and whenever they could, they would throw chunks of bread in the garbage. We were truly scavengers. Even with our garbage supplement we lost over thirty pounds in the month we were in Auschwitz.

During this time, we got to know our Capo. She was a girl in her late twenties or so it seemed. She came from Poland and said she used to have a large family. She had been in Auschwitz two years already. Her manner was loud and cruel and we often questioned whether she was a Jewess, or placed among us to spy. Once we had learned her story, we had no doubt of her being Jewish. Her village had been cleared of the Jewish population two years before and shipped to Auschwitz. Most of them were to be killed and cremated but they needed strong, young people to handle the very act of sorting the bodies, removing gold teeth, cutting hair and finally to place the bodies in the ovens. Instead of ordering a group of younger people for this heartbreaking step in the process of eliminating human lives, they gave an option; whoever would volunteer for this job, his or her life would be spared. Our Capo was one of the volunteers.

The following day she was faced with the ordeal of placing her whole family in the ovens, along with people she knew. With tears flowing she said that since that day she felt like a Nazi and she would never be able to feel any other way. Twice she had tried to kill herself but failed.

After six months on the Commando detail she was told she would be a Capo in one of the barracks. She had her own little cubicle at the entrance of the barrack with a curtain drawn for privacy. She had plenty to eat, but she had no peace of mind. She showed no mercy to any of the prisoners and repeated over and over again, "You don't know how good you have it!" Her screams were heard often in the night and no one dared go near her to comfort her. She was in hell day and night. Listening to her and seeing the change in the people I used to know, distrusting everyone, hiding a bite of leftover ration, crying for lost

comfort; it was hard to hold on to one's sanity; hard to hope or believe that this madness would end and we would once again return to what we used to consider a normal life.

I stopped praying, for I knew no one was listening. I cursed God, without any fear of punishment. I thought of my family all dead—all of them dead, because they were Jewish. I cursed God for making me so unfeeling that I could not shed a tear for them. I cursed God for allowing the world to put me in this hell, when I had hardly lived yet. I cursed Him for giving me a death sentence when I was innocent. I could not fight the Nazis but I could wage a cursing war against God. I dared Him to stop the chimneys from smoking, if He had any compassion and to stop this ache in my belly so I could think of things other than food. I wanted Him to know the shame I felt to go to the latrine that seats a thousand skeletons, the frustration that overcame me when the spigots ran dry before I had a chance to wash my hands. I wanted Him to know about the smell that was not human anymore, the dirt that would not come off anymore and the smell of the burning flesh that was in the air all the time. I cried out, "God, you did not hear a word I was saying. The chimneys are still smoking and I am choking from the smoke of my brothers' burning flesh." I had to reach deep inside me to find some inner strength; not to give up. I thought of my mother and I imagined her standing beside me telling me, "Cry my dear; it will be easier" and I cried and cried and it did make me feel better. Finally blessed sleep claimed my warring mind.

Weeks went by.

One morning we were told there would be an Appell at noon time. Our fear intensified. Would we be sent to the crematoriums? Worse yet, would we be sent to Birkenau for medical experiments. No one had come back alive from either place. Our fears were not justified this time. One thousand of us were selected and marched off to a train platform. A sigh of relief, we were leaving Auschwitz.

We were jammed into the cattle cars again without food or water. For almost 24 hours we were riding in this train and finally the next day about noon we arrived at Stutthof. It was a much smaller camp than Auschwitz and the officers were all S.S. The first thing we had to do was stand Appell to make sure no one had escaped. When that was done, we were led into a huge room and were told to take off all our clothing and march out one by one for health inspection. We must have been a sight—bald and emaciated. We appeared to be everything but healthy females. The sneering faces of the S.S. is a picture that will never be erased from my mind. Once the inspection was over, we picked out our clothing from

the pile on the floor, got dressed and waited for further instructions. We were assigned to our barracks and work detail. It was late afternoon already and we had not eaten since the day before. As it turned out, we were not fed till the next morning. What we had to do the rest of the day was take our communal showers and get a dose of D.D.T.

Next morning we were given a slice of bread and coffee. Our work was underground. All the factories were dug into and under the hillside. Trees and bushes covered the entrances and from the top it looked like a pastoral setting for nothing more sinister than a picnic. The factory was set up to manufacture gunpowder. Our job was to fill the shells with gunpowder. The work was hard and it made us sick. After 12 hours of work, we all had pale faces and blue lips. Once a day we received a cup of milk to ward off the ill effects of working with the gunpowder. It did not help.

The factory was cleverly concealed with lovely landscape and tall trees and with the barracks hidden all through the forest. Only a dozen or so red-tiled homes dotted the area. From the air, it was impossible to discover the real purpose and function of the hillside. Our keepers and guardians lived in the red-roofed homes with their families.

Most of the S.S. officers were married with young children. There was one young boy about three years old, fair as only a German can be. The sight of him made me wish I was back in Auswitz. It was the first baby child I had seen since I stepped off that cattle train more than six weeks ago. It unnerved me, brought back the past and memories that I tried so hard not to think about to keep my sanity. It was worse seeing that child, as innocent as he was—that child of a Nazi; worse than our miserable existence. The pain tore at my insides, "Where is my family? Where is my little brother? Where is my little sister? Why am I here in this godforsaken place? Why am I not dead as they are?" I turned away and started crying, berating myself for being such a fool for letting a child get to me like that. I walked back to my barracks and swore never to walk that way again.

More and more transports were coming. It seemed as though all the Jews in Europe were herded into the labor camps with the exception of the ones who were killed in the crematoriums.

Soon there were rumors that we would be sent to still another labor camp. I hoped it would be soon because we were so weak from the work and hunger I did not know what gave us the strength to go on. I thought each day was the last. Dying would have been so easy; yet so hard. We went to sleep hungry and woke up hungry. In my dreams I filled my stomach until I could eat no more. When I woke up the pain in my guts made me cry.

My cousin was getting smaller and smaller; not only thinner, but she appeared to me to be shrinking with each passing day. She was so sick from the work that I gave her my ration of milk to drink. I was sure she could not survive this life much longer. I thought of my Aunt who made me promise to take care of her child and here I was watching her just waste away and all I was able to do was worry—worry how to live another day.

I never knew that people could be only skin and bones and still function. I didn't know that somehow the body pulls itself together each day and fights to survive till the last breath. When I looked all around us I could not believe that eight short weeks made all those changes in us. "Where did that other person that was me disappear to? Would I ever return to my former self?" Even if we were freed tomorrow, only eight weeks after our deportation, nothing would bring back our families or the years of living that were snuffed out from young and old alike.

I wanted to stop thinking so I went outside to clear my head. I went but a few steps when the bell sounded for Appel. We lined up as usual and were told that we were going to be transferred to another camp immediately. The trains were ready and we marched to the platform, 1000 Jewish souls, marching on to a different labor camp, to lend a helping hand to the German government in their war effort. How ironic! The hated, despised Jews were needed to do the work of the diminishing German work force. Kill them, or use them, that was the high German motto. But as long as we were being transferred, we knew we were safe.

Our trip took a night and a day without any food or water. Finally we arrived in a small town named Branau, near Warsaw, Poland. From the platform we marched to the camp which was on the outskirts of town. The Polish people hardly noticed us. A thousand women in striped dresses, heads shaven, silent and utterly invisible!

Once we arrived at our camp site, we had to stand for the cursed Appel again. The camp was very large and the barracks held only 40 people. It also had a huge administration building, a work shop, a kitchen, a shower room and a hospital. Our guards were Wehrmacht soldiers, who were supposed to be less cruel than the S.S.

All thousand accounted for, we were told of our work schedule, mess times, shower schedule. K.P. duty was assigned, one for the prisoners and one for the officers. Each barracks had a "captain" assigned, who was responsible for rationing the food evenly and for cleanliness. We were very, very hungry. We had not eaten anything for over 24 hours

and it looked like we were not going to eat for another 12 hours yet. The kitchen would not be in service till morning. But the showers were working and we all went through the ritual, under the shower then a dose of D.D.T. Then we were assigned to our barracks, 40 women to each one. There was the usual bunk beds on each side, a long table in the middle with benches and a pot-bellied stove up front. The stove made me think of winter but I brushed the thought aside. It was July and it couldn't last through the winter; we would not last through the winter! The idea was unthinkable.

We fell into our bunks after our shower and slept from hunger and sheer exhaustion. Next morning the bell rang at 5:00 a.m. Warily we lined up outside and had a lot of time to look around our "new home." There was a barbed wire fence all around the camp and sentries posted high above the ground, armed and ready to shoot. Outside the gate, a short distance from the camp, were the officers' cabins, the administration office and their mess hall and social hall. Inside the camp, the barracks were lined up neatly side by side. The kitchen was the last barrack at the end of the row and facing it was the work shop. There was one cabin in the center that was marked on the roof, Hospital.

By the time we finished looking around, the counting had begun. It took about an hour. The guards all had whips and as they walked up and down the whip touched a shoulder or a head and we never knew when it was going to be real, except the fear was real.

After the counting was over, we ate our breakfast, bread and coffee and were separated into groups of hundreds. The first group was assigned to the underground factories, the second to the train station to unload coal from the wagons and the third to dig ditches for sewer pipes. Before we were dismissed, we were warned not to get sick, because the German Reich would only feed us if we could work and the hospital was not for sick people but for accidents only. We were also warned that if we did not meet our work quota each day, our rations would be cut in half. With those encouraging words we were dismissed and our first working day began.

The work was so hard that by noon break we were so exhausted we did not know if we could continue after lunch break. It did not help any that lunch was only a slice of bread and coffee. We were to have our big meal at night in the camp. I was on the train station detail, unloading coal. As we unloaded trainloads of coal, we were goaded constantly to do it faster and faster. How does one get the strength to lift another shovel of coal and work another 12-hour day? We worked like robots and we felt like robots. At night we compared our work and it was just as hard for the others as it was for us. Just imagine, 15-

to 50-year old girls and women digging ditches to lay down sewer pipes; doing the kind of work most men shun. It did not seem real. But nothing was real, nothing made any sense. Only the hunger was real. Our body ate itself up, just to survive—self-cannibalism. And yet, Branau was a camp where no one was killed. Yes, some people died but not because they were gassed or shot, they died because of circumstances. I felt lucky sometimes that I was sent away from Auswitz, but do I thank God for my good luck? How could I? He let me be taken to this hell! The Germans? How could I? They killed my family and all my friends. They made me walk naked, shaved my head and dried up my tears. They made me inhuman, took away my shame, made me hungry all the time and kept me imprisoned when I did not commit any crime—only one, to be a Jew. No, don't think! There cannot be any questions because there aren't any answers. Go back to being a robot; it is easier that way.

Every day we went to our work assignment except Sunday. But Sundays were busy too. Laundry had to be done; showers to be taken; the barracks had to be cleaned. Sundays never had enough hours in them. The worst part of it was that being August, the summer was at its peak with blue skies and green grass all there to be enjoyed—but there was no pleasure in it. It did not matter. It made no difference.

As the days passed by, the work became more and more difficult. The food was such a small portion, that eating it took only minutes although I wanted to stretch it out forever. It was tasteless, colorless; it smelled vile and I could not get enough of it.

One of the girls who lived in our barracks was a hairdresser for the female guards. She was rewarded sometimes with leftover food from the officers' kitchen. One Sunday she came in at lunch time with four hard-boiled eggs. We accepted it; that her "rewards" were shared only by her four sisters.

As we were having lunch, The Oberfuhrer stopped in for a spot inspection that was pretty routine. We had two long tables with benches in the middle of the cabin; twenty girls to each table and each table had a server to ladle out the food from a large kettle. I was the designated server at our table that week. The other table was eating their meal and the hard-boiled eggs. The Oberfuhrer looked at our table and asked for the server to stand up. I got up and waited. He said, "Where are your hard-boiled eggs?" I turned to ice inside and fire on the outside. If I said we didn't have any, the other table would get in trouble. Who knows what would happen to them? So I said, "We ate ours already." He asked me again and I repeated my answer. He raised his hand; they were as big as shovels and he slapped me left and he slapped me right. Then he said, "You are a liar!" He stormed out

of the cabin and I stood there frozen. I had never been slapped before in my life. My face was burning, my eyes teared up but I was holding it back, as if my life depended on it.

All the girls tried to make me feel better. They hugged and kissed me and I did not cry until late that night when I was in my bunk and I was sure no one could see me. I still don't know why it was so important not to cry in front of everyone; all I knew was that it was. From that time on, the hairdresser girl shared every bit of extra food she received.

Sometimes I was so tired and so hungry that I could not sleep and when everyone was asleep, there was no one to talk to. All one could do was daydream in the middle of the night. I would transport myself back to my home before the Nazis came and relive events that made me happy. Like Friday nights after dinner, when we all sat in our living room waiting for my Father to ask me, "Would you sing tonight?" I had a fairly good voice. Even my brothers liked my singing and it was our Friday night entertainment. I stood up, took my place by the window and sang one song after the other. Then I asked for requests. Sometimes people stopped outside our window to listen to my singing. My Father hummed along and sometimes my Mother joined in. We were all so happy just being with each other.

I would recall the Saturday afternoons when, after our noon meal, my Father would call each of his five children separately for a walk with him to discuss the past week's events, school problems or just plain talk. It was father and child talk. He travelled a lot with his job and he could not spend as much time with us as our mother did, but Saturdays were for his children. He was deeply religious but not a fanatic. He was way ahead of his time, for he allowed us a freedom that had its origin in his trust in us. He made us believe that he would always trust us to do what was right. "My gentle father, where are you? What has happened to you?"

Sometimes my thoughts sought out my little brother's face. Nine years old, only nine years old. Why do I remember so much about him? Maybe because he was the youngest or because he was so smart? At age four he taught himself to read and write. Once he mastered reading, he was never seen without a book in his hand. The pain was unbearable to think that he was gone.

Morning came slowly. Another sleepless night had passed and the bell sounding for Appell brought me back to reality. That day I was assigned to the ditch digging detail. I never worked so hard in my life as that day. We were standing waist deep in the ditches, shovelling dirt to the side of the road until our arms felt like they were going to fall off.

When it was deep enough, we climbed out of our hole and started moving the pipes as the Wermacht guards snickered at our futile attempts to place the pipes in the ditches. Clearly the job was meant for strong men, not for a dozen girls who looked more dead than alive. Finally the Wermacht guards were called to give us a hand and by evening the job was done.

Slowly the hard work began to take its toll. More and more girls took ill. The cuts were the worst, for if they became infected, there wasn't any medicine to treat them. There were no bandages to keep them clean, not even a bandaid. With a simple boil, one could still work but when it became gangrene you were allowed to go to the hospital.

Once you were in the hospital, one could either get well on aspirin or one could die. There was room for only 20 girls to get sick at one time. At night the Doctor had "office hours." The girls lined up to be treated for colds, cuts and bruises, sprained ankles, toothaches, rashes and a number of minor ailments. All the treatments were the same—a few aspirins, cold compresses and a cup of tea.

About the first week of November, the fatigue and malnutrition had taken its toll on me. I collapsed. My legs just wouldn't carry me any longer. My left leg, that had been in a brace for five years due to a childhood disease was giving me a great deal of trouble. It was so painful, I could hardly walk on it anymore. I dragged my leg so badly that finally a guard noticed it and asked what was the matter with me. Since I spoke German, I told him that all I needed was a few days of rest and would be all right. He was very sympathetic and told me he would arrange for me to see the German doctor. I protested that it was nothing, not to bother the doctor with it (I feared I would be sent back to Auschwitz), but he would not hear of it. Next day I was called in to see the doctor. His office was in the administration building and it was at the end of a long corridor. I limped my way to the office and was told to wait until I was called.

After about two hours of waiting, I was called to the outer office, which was the room where all the girls were working. I thought the doctor would question me in his office, but that was not the case. He was sitting on the edge of a desk, looked me over and started his questioning. "Where does it hurt? Why do you limp? Do you get sick often?" He asked me to lift my skirt up. He wanted to look at my hip, with all of the people looking. Since there was nothing suspicious-looking about my hip, he felt he did not need to send me back to Auschwitz. He said he would do his friend a favor and assign me to camp duty. He asked me if I could repair shoes? Without thinking, I said yes. He told me

to report to the shoe repair room and to tell the officer in charge that he had sent me. With a wave of his hand, he dismissed me. I thanked him for his kindness and limped my way out of the office, out to the yard and to the shoe repair shed at the other end of the yard.

I reported dutifully to the officer in charge. He was a young man of about thirty, very tall, very blonde and very blue-eyed—the picture of a perfect German. He was also very kind. He was so kind that tears came into my eyes. He asked me what I knew about shoe repair? I could not lie to him like I had lied to the doctor, so I told him I knew nothing about shoe repair, but that I did know how to ~~sew~~ sew. He said that was fine, that he would show me what to do. I mustered up some courage and asked him, "Were you a shoemaker before the war?" He started to laugh. He said, "No. I was going to go into the banking business, but my country needed me and here I am, teaching you and the others how to fix your shoes." I thought he was being sarcastic, but he took his job very seriously.

There were four more girls working there besides me and shoes were piled up in every available space. The room was warm. Sunlight was coming through the windows and I thought, "If only I could work here until it's over. Then I'll be all right." The work shift at the shoe repair shop was from 7:00 a.m. until 9:00 p.m. Every night the girls brought their tattered shoes to be mended and then to be picked up by the following evening. Those days when their shoes were in the shop, the girls were assigned indoor duty. Those of us who worked in the shop received an extra slice of bread and an extra ladle of soup. I ate the extra soup but saved the bread for my cousin. I became quite adept in sewing parts of the shoes. It took a little practice, but I was able to cut a heel or a half sole and tack it onto the shoe. The officer in charge was there to help every one of us. He never got angry or upset when we ruined a piece of leather. He just kept saying to try harder next time. You can do it. He was so much like a friend, but we were distrustful because he was German.

The three weeks I spent working in the shop, even with the long hours, were more like a vacation than work. My leg, however, was getting worse instead of better. I barely dragged myself to the shop. It was very painful to move. When I got there I sat down to work and only moved if I really had to. The girls in the shop tried to help me by putting the easy work on my table. They handed me all of the tools and materials so that I wouldn't have to get up for anything. I carried on like this for a few more days. Then, alas, the day had come when I couldn't walk at all. It happened at the end of the day in the shop when I wanted to get up from my chair and walk back to my cabin. I tried and tried but could not take a step. The Wehrmacht officer in charge came over to me and asked me what was

wrong? I told him that I needed some help to get back to my cabin, that I couldn't walk. He called two of the girls over and told them to give me a hand. He said that he would come over to the hospital with me and ask the doctor to make room for me to rest for a few days.

The hospital was a short distance away from the shop, but it seemed miles away for me. As we entered, the doctor rushed over, fearing an accident. As she heard my story she busied herself for a few minutes and came back, saying that a bed was ready. I was left in her care and I sent word to my cousin that I was in the hospital. I was put to bed, given a bowl of soup and fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. When I woke up the next morning, the doctor came over and asked me how I felt. She gave me two aspirins, coffee and a slice of bread. I was unable to move; the pain would not let me. I told her that if I could stay in bed for a few days, the pain would subside and I could probably walk again. She said I was there to rest.

I looked around and wondered if anyone ever got better in this place. There were twenty cots in the room, with twenty skeletons on them. The cots were comfortable. They had straw mattresses, linen blankets and pillows. A pillow! This was unheard of in the camps. There were two more rooms. One had five cots in it, for the very ill and dying. The third room was the treatment room and living space for the doctor. She was on call 24 hours a day.

The doctor was about 50 years old and from Riga, Latvia. A petite woman, with great big dark eyes, very sad eyes. They seemed to say, "I have seen too much." She was the kindest person I have ever known, but she was always barking, goading you to get well. She would say that she needed the bed for people who were really sick. It killed her that she had no means of giving real help, for all she had to dispense was aspirin. She put on an angry face and raised her voice as she made her rounds three times a day. She yelled, "You and you, you had better get well; give someone else a chance to rest!" But when a young girl was dying of gangrene, she sat by her bed all night. She cradled her in her arms, stroked her hair, kissed her in the dark of the night and told her right up to the last minute that she would be alright. That night the poor soul passed away and death was as close to me as my own breath.

Later, when sleep wouldn't come, the doctor sat at my bedside and asked about my family. She asked what I wanted to do when this was all over. I asked her what made her so sure that we would be alive when it was over. She said she just knew. She told me that she had

no one left in her family. Everyone had been sent to the ovens except her. She believed that she was saved to take care of all of us in this camp. Otherwise, she said that being alive wouldn't make any sense to her. She also believed that we were all going to survive, that the end was near for the Nazis. She had more hope than I did. Perhaps it was because I was flat on my back. I was thinking that even if it is over tomorrow, how would I walk and how would I go on. If I couldn't walk I would be left behind and die. "No," I said to her. "I am not at all sure that I am going to make it." She checked my leg and tried to move it. The pain was very bad. She pulled her hand away and said for me to just rest, that she would get me some aspirins. She walked over to her little cubicle and returned with two aspirins. She said, "I am sorry but that is all there is that I can give you. Tomorrow I will try to get you a little milk and sugar." I was so grateful to her for caring for me. I grabbed her hand and pulled it to my cheek. She quickly pulled it away and said, "Don't get soft; it only weakens you and you will need all of your strength to get out of here." She quickly moved over to another bed to give me a chance to compose myself.

I lay there motionless, holding back my tears, for I felt such despair. I had been in the hospital for a week now and I knew that I was not getting any better. I kept thinking that if I did not improve, I would be sent back to Auschwitz.

I remembered a woman in our camp who had learned that she was pregnant when we arrived in Branau. She tried to hide her condition but was found out when the girls at the work detail covered up for her during a rest period. When they took a look at her, they knew why. She was taken to the German doctor to be examined and was told that she could carry the baby to full term. They never told her that if the baby was born alive, they would not let it live. She had a baby boy. It was taken by the doctor and later the mother was told the baby had died. They allowed her to bury the baby outside the camp. Never was a kaddish said with so much pain, with so much emotion and so many tears. The feeling of hopelessness was so overpowering that at that moment we would have been happy to lay down beside that tiny infant and put an end to this futile existence.

As I was recalling this sad episode, the words hammered in my mind. I must not let them kill me! I mustered all the strength I could and got up from my cot, just to sit on the edge for a little while. Then I stood up and tried to take a step. But no matter how hard I tried, I just couldn't move my leg. I sat down and cried, pitiful tears streaming down my face. It was as if a damn had opened up and there was no way I could close it until it dried up.

When my cousins came to visit me that night, I poured out my fears to them. "What will happen if the war is over and I am unable to go on?" They reassured me that we would always stay together, come what may. I looked at them and my heart sank. They looked like skeletons. I didn't think any of us had a chance. Each day I put aside a bite of food to share with them. It was not much, but a bite of food was like a treasure. I remembered the days, a long time ago, when visitors came to our home and we offered sweets and fruits and coffee and tea. Those were wonderful afternoons, together and happy. I ached for those days. All I wanted was my life back the way it was before the Nazis came.

I found myself crying much too much while I was in the hospital. The days were endless and the nights sleepless. All I had to do was think back and the silent crying began. The tears flowed without a sound. Why couldn't I turn off my feelings? Why all this torture? Why were they able to sleep, to laugh, go about their daily life as if we didn't exist, except as numbers—1000 heads, 2000 hands to put to work each day, 1000 mouths to feed a starvation diet? That's all we were to them—numbers, numbers, numbers. I wanted to sleep and to not think anymore.

The next morning before work my cousin came over to the hospital. She told me about rumors that we were to be shipped back to Auschwitz, or that the Russians were near and soon the war would be over. The days and the weeks that followed were full of speculation. Would the Nazis send us back or would they leave us? They were getting ready to celebrate the coming new year, but they were in no mood to celebrate. They must have known more than we did, for one of the woman guards came to visit me in the hospital. She asked me if I would say that she had not mistreated anyone, when the war was over. I told her I would, for she truly had not mistreated anyone. She seemed relieved and she said for me to tell my friends what she had just asked me. She then went back to the party. All night long we could hear the singing from the officers' building. They partied until early morning, as if they knew that soon the "party" would be over and a new leaf would be turned in history.

January came and went and I was still in the hospital. Everyone looked half dead. The cold and hunger had made everyone look sub-human. February came and it was snowing for days. The rumors never stopped now. It was said, "They are this close." The next day they were only that far away. We lived for rumors. On the 16th of February everyone was assembled in the yard, except the people from the hospital. An order was given. The next morning we would leave the camp and move on to another one. There was no reason given for the move, but everyone knew the Russians must be near.

The next day at dawn the march began. Those in the hospital who could walk marched with the rest. Those who could not were put on a make-shift sled. The roads were packed solid with snow. The girls were assigned to pull the sleds. It was so cold that our teeth would not stop chattering. About noon we stopped for a rest and a meager ration was handed out to all. At the end of the day we pulled over to the side of the road and again some food was distributed. We huddled for warmth and waited for the night to pass. From a distance, we heard the sounds of war. It was very reassuring and scary at the same time.

The next morning, at the crack of dawn, we were assembled again and continued on. The girl who was pulling me on the sled started to cry. She did not have the strength to pull me anymore. The Vermacht guard who had taken me into the hospital when I could not walk anymore came over. He said that he was going to pull me the rest of the way. I was so numb from the cold that I could not care less whether they left me or took me along. At night we pulled over to the side of the road again and wondered if we were going to make it through the night. The cold was unbearable; it was worse than the hunger. My toes and fingers were frostbitten; they were itching terribly. I was not alone; everyone felt the same way. Fitful sleep claimed our tired, aching bodies.

When we woke up the next morning we could not believe our eyes. We had been abandoned. There was not a Nazi in sight! We looked everywhere—nothing, only a sea of striped-cloth prisoners, as far as the eye could see. We just could not believe we were free. For hours we were undecided what direction to take or how to think for ourselves. Along the road there were farm houses. We decided that we would go to each house and ask the people who lived there to let us in and give us some food.

About a dozen girls went scouting and came back all excited. Every home was empty, but some had a fire going and there was food. The natives must have run away from the Russian army. We started filling up each house and decided to wait for the Russians. How can I explain even a trace of what we were feeling free of the Nazi guards! How can I tell about the feeling of warmth after days in the cold? How can I explain the joy of being in a home after all this time of living in barracks. Even if it is a Polish peasant's home, who also must be a Nazi, else he would not run for his life.

Hope was renewed in all of us. We had come to the end of our suffering. There was a roof over our heads, the fire was going and there was food to eat. Everyone ate except me. I ate only a slice of bread and a cup of tea. Lying flat on my back, unable to walk, I thought the less I ate, the less I would have to go to the outhouse. Alas, all the girls who

gorged themselves with the rich sausages, bacon, milk, butter and the like had the worst diarrhea the whole night through. Little did we know that our starved, shrunken bodies were not able to handle normal food. We ransacked the house for clothing and shoes for all except me. Someone gave me a blanket that I wrapped around myself, for even in the warm house I could not get warm. The girls slept all over the house—on the floor, in the bed. Every room and every space was used and sleep came fast.

Suddenly we heard gunfire. The Russians were there and they thought Poles or Germans were in the house. One of the girls quickly grabbed a white tablecloth and fastened it onto a pole. She went upstairs to hang it out the window. She shouted, "We are Katzet prisoners. Don't shoot!" She got shot in the shoulder. When they broke down the door, their faces fell at the sight of all these miserable looking women. A Jewish Russian soldier started talking Yiddish and asked us how we got there. We explained what happened to us. He asked if we knew where the German soldiers had gone. We had no answer for him. What happened after that left us speechless. The soldiers started to empty the cupboards, looking for food. They were so hungry that they took every drop of food they could find and left us without as much as a crumb. They promised that when the reinforcements reached us, they would give us plenty of food and help us get back to our country.

True enough, they came. But they were worse than we could imagine. They were drunk and wanted to rape everyone. The girls were trying to find hiding places. I was lying on the floor on my straw mattress. Before someone had a chance to help me away, a soldier laid down next to me. All I could think of was, "Mother, help me!" To my great fortune he was so drunk that as soon as he put his head down, he fell asleep. Then I had to have some help so that when he woke up he did not find me next to him. I called two of my cousins who slowly inched me off the mattress and helped me into another room. We were huddled in a closet all night long. We dared not make a sound, for fear of discovery.

The next morning we heard a lot of commotion and sounds of people leaving. When it was quiet for a considerable time, we ventured out of the closet and other hiding places. The place was empty of our liberating Russian army. A sigh of relief! We had survived this too. We decided that we would leave immediately. We took what we could carry or wear and started out on our journey. Warsaw was about 50 kilometers from where we were. We knew if we wanted to go back to our home we would have to go to Warsaw. It was very cold but the sun was shining. We were hoping that it would stay that way. I was still on the sled. The girls took turns pulling me. All along the road we saw frozen corpses in

grotesque positions; a hand sticking out, a leg up in the air, or only a head with no body—just a head staring up into the sun, as if sunbathing. None of these sights elicited any feelings. We were frozen inside and out. The Russian soldiers passed us by. They did not bother with us; they still had a war to fight. They did tell us which direction to go and they also told us that Warsaw had been liberated. It was a free city once again.

Five days later we arrived at the outskirts of the city. The sight was unbelievable. Row after row of rubble—a wall standing here and windows gaping open. Women and children bent low, clearing bricks from the rubble and piling it in neat rows. The war had taken its toll on the city of Warsaw. We did not know where to go or who to ask in this strange city. Finally we asked for directions to the railroad station. Instead we were told to go to the Jewish agency that would help us. Obviously this situation had happened before. They knew that we were Jewish ex-prisoners. By noon we arrived at a half bombed-out building with a big sign on it that read "International Jewish Organization." Going inside we found an office, or what looked like an office. Someone asked us where we were going and where we had come from. When all was told we were registered, given a bowl of soup, a slice of bread and a blanket. In the next room we took our spot on the floor and I was helped off the sled. We spread our blanket on the floor and my cousins and I laid down to rest. We slept nearly 24 hours; nothing happening in the room could disturb us.

We spent the next day getting to know the people around us. They were from everywhere—Germany, France, Holland, Poland, Latvia and so on. Every country that the Germans occupied had been emptied of Jews and other unwanted human beings who did not fit the Aryan concept. We checked the list that was tacked to the wall, to see if we knew anyone. Our names had been added to the list already. The people who were working in the office were doing a superhuman job; trying to care for everyone who stumbled into this place. My sled broke and it was discarded. Someone brought me a cane and handed it to me so that I could get up to go to the outhouse. In order to get washed, we had to stand in line, for there was only one spigot. We were full of lice and there was no way to really get cleaned up, or to discard our clothing and to put new ones on. Everyone was talking about getting home as soon as possible.

The trains started to run, not on schedule, but they were running. They carried mostly soldiers but allowed about 40 to 50 people each day to get on the trains. We decided that I was not up to a train ride or any type of travel until I could walk again. I said that I would go to a hospital and stay there until I felt better and then go home on my own. My

cousins wanted to stay until I was well enough to travel, but I would not hear of it. All I wanted was for them to help me to a hospital, then they could start out for home. We lingered on for a few more days and learned that there was a hospital still in service.

One day we started out toward it. It was slow going, for every step I took pained me. We stopped every so often to rest. Finally, about 5:00 p.m., we arrived at the hospital. It was the only building still intact in the bombed-out neighborhood. I sent my cousins away at the door, amid a tearful goodbye from each. I said that I would have a better chance of being accepted if they thought there was no one to care for me.

When I entered, a nun came to ask me what I wanted. First she spoke in Polish. I answered her in Hungarian. Then she asked me in German. I was able to answer her and told her my sad story. I told her in a nutshell that I was left by the Nazis. I told her that I had made my way to Warsaw with the help of my friends but that they had now gone on their way. I told her that I was unable to continue with them and that I saw the hospital sign on the building and so I walked in, for I could not go any further. She said that they did not have any room for me, not even a cot. Every space was taken up by the war casualties. All she could do was give me some soup and I'd have to be going. I thanked her for the soup and said that I did not have any strength to go anywhere. I asked if it would be alright if I just sat in the lobby. She said that I could stay there until visiting time was over, then I'd have to leave. To that I said nothing.

I settled down in a chair, put my cane next to me and thought to myself that sooner or later they would have to do something. Surely they would not put me out into the street so late at night. It was 8:00 p.m. and true to her words the nun brought me a bowl of soup and a slice of bread. I thanked her again. After finishing eating I asked her to help me to the washroom. When she saw how difficult it was for me to walk she warmed up a little and started asking questions. Since I had the striped concentration camp jacket on, she asked me how I got it. I told her about Auschwitz and the rest of the camps—only a few words, for I did not know if she was pretending or denying any knowledge about the camps—all of them on Polish soil. Without a word she left me sitting in the chair. I made myself as comfortable as I could and watched the people come and go.

About 11:30 p.m. a doctor in a white coat approached me with the same nun who had talked to me beforehand. He asked what was wrong with me. I told him that I had a disease in my hip and that I couldn't walk. I told him that I was just liberated from a concentration camp and that I needed some time to rest. I needed some nourishing food and then I

would be able to go home. He looked at the nun, then to me. Then, after a discussion in Polish with the nun, and German with me, he said that I could stay a few days—that was all. I thanked him and said that was fine. I thought that once I was in a bed, I just wouldn't get up.

Two nuns were called and in a wheelchair they took me up a ramp to the second floor. They stripped me of my clothing and sent it somewhere to be disinfected; then they helped me to a bathroom. A tub was in the middle of the room and it was being filled with warm water. When it was full, the two nuns picked me up and put me in the water. That was my first bath since we left home. The nun replaced the water twice before she let me get out of the tub. She washed my hair and sprayed me with D.D.T. I can't describe the feeling of feeling clean. I thought I would cry, but I didn't. The nun dried me, put a hospital gown on me and wheeled me into a room full of patients. It was a dimly lit room with about two dozen beds; mine was in the middle. Most of the people were asleep and no one paid any attention to me. I fell asleep in no time. The next morning when I awoke I did not want to believe my good fortune. I was in a hospital, in a clean bed and someone was taking care of me. Soon I would be able to go home.

The nurses spoke only Polish, so we did not have much to say to each other. They brought me food, washed me and tried to make me comfortable. Three days later "my nun" came to me and asked if I could get up and walk for her. I said that I would try. Of course I couldn't. She did not say a word, just walked away. I felt safe; they were not going to throw me out. In the next few weeks I learned a few words of Polish. I ate everything they brought to me and I got a little stronger. The third week I got up from the bed and took a few steps. Someone brought me my cane and I practiced walking a little more each day. The fourth week the nun brought me my striped clothing and said that I was well enough to leave. I knew that this was it.

After lunch I got dressed and she helped me out the door, giving me a hug and wishing me well. Her kindness made me cry. I stood there for a short time, wiped my tears and started out for the Jewish Organization office, where we had first arrived. It was quite a distance away from the hospital. I was walking only about five minutes when a horse drawn buggy pulled up beside me. The man driving asked me where I wanted to go. I was able to pick out a few words of Polish and understood his question. I told him the name of the Jewish organization and he said that he would take me there. I said that I did not have any money and could not pay him. He shook his head, as if to say, "Don't worry." He helped me up on the buggy. I practiced my meager Polish on him and we had a pleasant ride to

the Jewish Displaced Persons office. I recognized the place immediately, for it was the only building standing in a row of rubble. I thanked my driver and went inside.

I registered after a short wait and asked if there were any Hungarians about. The girl at the desk pointed out two girls standing at the far end of the room. I went over to them and started a conversation. I asked them where they came from and where they were going. As it turned out, they were from a village not far from where I was deported. Without hesitation, they told me that we could all go together as far as we could, to our respective homes. I had two friends in a matter of minutes. I tried to find out if anyone knew what happened to my cousins, but no one had any information about them. I assumed, somehow, that they started home or were possibly home already. We found out that the trains were running, but very haphazardly. One had to go to the station each day. If a train was going in the direction that you wanted to go, then you had to jostle and fight to be able to get on the train.

Half of the train was filled with Russian troops and space was limited. I had no funds whatsoever, only the clothes on my back and my cane. My friends had some money so we decided to get our pictures taken by a street vendor, in case we needed I.D. papers. I changed my name to theirs so that we could appear as sisters. All of this information was written on the back of the pictures. When we went back to the office we had someone put a seal on it, to make it look official. For some unexplainable reason we felt more secure acting as a family. We walked to the station each day, without any luck, until the second week. After a lot of pushing and shoving, we were able to get on the train. We smiled happily at each other. Finally we were on our way home. We settled down, the three of us, next to each other and the waiting began. It took ten hours before the train began to move. We had a little food with us and a little water. By the time we finished our meal, half of our food was gone. Finally sleep claimed our tired bodies. We lost track of time, for the train stopped on and off all through the night.

The next morning we arrived at Crakow and everyone was taken off, saying that this was as far as this train was going. We all got off and milled around the station, looking for ways of transportation. Nothing was leaving that day for where we wanted to go. We stayed in Crakow overnight and slept on the station floor like everyone else. We hoped for another train the next day.

When we were finally able to board a train two days later, we were faced with another problem. The train was full of Russian soldiers. They were half drunk, boisterous. They were looking for only one thing—how to grab a girl. We disguised ourselves as much as we

could. We put on more and more clothing or rags, covered our heads and tried to look even worse than we did. The fact that we were wearing the hated striped concentration camp-style clothing did not deter them. It did not matter to them that we were victims and should be treated with a little consideration instead of harassment. We hid under the seats, not moving, not speaking, just hoping we would make it to the next stop. When the train finally stopped the next morning, we decided to get off and wait for another train.

The station was teeming with people. There were no food vendors. We did not have any money left anyway. Getting something to eat was the hardest thing to accomplish. We walked along the streets and when we saw a house that looked like it was occupied, we just knocked on the door and asked for a slice of bread. Sometimes they gave it to us and sometimes they slammed the door in our faces. Begging was not as bad as going hungry. The feeling of hunger was more overpowering than shame. Slowly we walked back to the train station and for once we were in luck. A train had just pulled in and we climbed aboard. This time it took us to Austria.

As the time came close to return to Hungary, a feeling of hopelessness returned. What if no one had survived? What if all of my family was gone? What would I do? Where would I go? What if my cousins did not make it home? Questions, questions, questions—I did not want to know the answers.

My two friends who had promised to stay with me until we got back, came up with a new idea. "In Hungary we will separate," they said. They would return to their home to look for their relatives and I would return to mine to do the same. If I did not find anyone, they would ask me to join them and we would decide together what we would want to do. I hugged and kissed them for their kind words of affection. I said that if I found no one, I would get in touch with them.

As we crossed the border, we were met by people ^{WHO} we were waiting for the returnees with lists of names, from all over the country. They were all hungry for information about their relatives who had not returned as yet. There was a makeshift shelter where everyone signed in and their names were added to the list of returnees. This is where I learned that one of my brothers was still alive and living in the village with my cousins. This was the same village from where I was deported. My heart sang with joy. Hope was returning. If he is alive, maybe more of my family survived. I said a tearful goodbye to my friends. The first day since the Nazis left us I was on my own, to make my way home. I was still walking with the cane and had no other clothing than the striped dress on my back. It was

so infested with lice that I scratched all the time. For weeks we had not had a chance to wash or to use a comb, only the damn lice to live with.

The next day I found a man who had a horse and carriage and he offered to take me as far as he was going. He shared his bread and bacon with me, gave me a drink from his jug of wine and we were on our way. We drove a full day, stopping here and there for a rest. Then he said that he would find a Jewish family where I could stay until I found other means of transportation; this was as far as he was going.

We were only about 50 kilometers from my village. He stopped the carriage in front of a house and went inside to talk to the people who lived there. A few minutes later a young woman about 30 years old came out of the house and invited me to come inside. The first thing she did was to take me to the bathroom, draw a hot bath and remove all of my clothing. She helped me into the tub, handed me a brush and soap and said, "Scrub, scrub, scrub. We will change the water until it comes clean." I cried and I laughed; then I washed again. I started to feel good. I felt that I was being cleansed inside and out. I felt that I was washing away all the pain, all the humiliation, all the hunger, and all the hatred. From now on everything would be clean—no more lice, no more scabs and no more hunger. I never wanted to leave that tub. But after a while my hostess was standing there with fresh clothing. She had sent mine out to be disinfected.

She then invited me to take supper with them. How can I explain the feeling of sitting down to a table, set with linens, china, silverware and napkins. People were sitting and talking, just like before the war. It was as if the time in between had been erased. How can I put into words the feeling of listening to the words, "Have some of this; have some of that." How can I stop my mind from replaying the hunt for potato peels, the garbage pile, the sawdust bread, the tears that never wanted to stop. Why is it that I am looking at this table, laden with food and I know I will choke on it if I take even one bite? Suddenly I felt guilt, horrendous guilt that there I was—clean, food in front of me, free, alive and I knew that they were all dead—family, friends, strangers; free perhaps, but dead. I could not eat, not just yet. We talked. I asked and they answered. They asked and I answered. The stories were the same, only the names differed. They came back a few months before and reclaimed their home and belongings. They still hoped that more of their relatives would return. After a while they planned to leave the country to go to either America or to Palestine. They did not want to stay and maybe go through the same ordeal again.

I realized that coming home was not the same as coming back. We had come home to seek the survivors; to join up and make a choice. There was no going back to the country we had loved so much. The pain was renewed as we heard the account of witnesses. Hope was extinguished to ever see our relatives again. It would be impossible to forgive or forget. There was a sense of urgency in me; to go and find whoever was alive and to take our leave as soon as possible.

I dreaded the thought of going back to the village, to the house that we were all taken from; to see the people once again who stood there and watched us leave. What would I say to them? Look at me! See! I am alive! I came back to haunt you; to show you that you could not destroy all of us! But listen to me good. You have killed my mother, my father, my brother and my sister. You are as guilty as the Nazis, for you have never raised a voice to say, "These people were my neighbors, you have no right to destroy them!" Would I ever be able to say all of this to them? I doubted that I ever would, for deep inside I was still scared of my countryman. I would have liked to turn around and never face the moment of return.

I drifted off to sleep between the soft linens and covers instead of my lice-infested, striped clothing. I yearned for peace of mind and heart. In the morning I asked for my clothing. I could not get rid of it, not just yet. I asked for some help to find transportation so that I could leave as soon as possible. By noon a carriage was ready to take me home. Word was brought to me that one of my brothers was waiting for me. After a grateful goodbye to my host, I was off to join my only known relative who survived, my brother.

Of my family of 53, including aunts and uncles and first cousins, 13 survived, 40 perished. Their ages were from four to sixty.

